

MASSACHUSETTS RARE AND ENDANGERED PLANTS

PRICKLY PEAR

(*Opuntia humifusa* (Raf.) Raf.)

DESCRIPTION

Prickly Pear cactus grows in sprawling clumps 2 to 3' (.6-.9m) across and generally less than a foot high. It has flat, fleshy green pads covered with clusters of short reddish-brown barbed bristles. Flowers are bright yellow, 2 to 3 inches wide (5-8cm), and bloom from the tops of the pads, opening only for several days in July. The large red fruits are pear-shaped, 1 to 2 inches (3-5cm.) long, juicy, sweet, and edible.

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS

On Nantucket *O. humifusa* grows on low stabilized dunes and ridges often with Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), Virginia Rose (*Rosa virginiana*), Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and Seaside Goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*). On the outer Cape, it grows in dry, sandy fields, dense grassy areas which have been mowed, cemeteries, and roadside embankments often with Little Bluestem (*Andropogon scoparius*), Poverty Grass (*Danthonia spicata*), Field Bentgrass (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Cat's Ear (*Hypochoeris radicata*) and Ribleaf Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*).

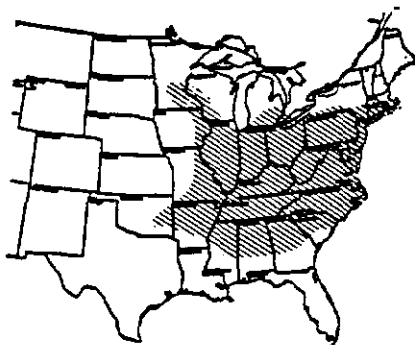


Britton, N.L. and N.A. Brown. An Illustrated Flora of the Northern United States and Canada. Dover Publications, Inc. 1970 reprint of 1913 ed.

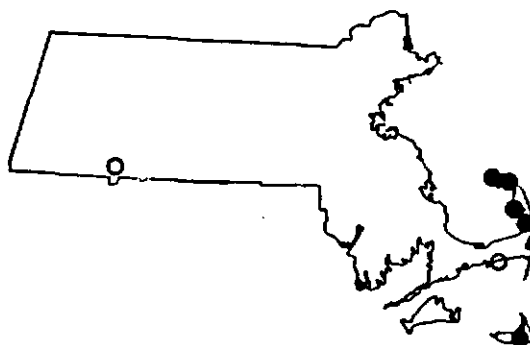
RANGE

Opuntia humifusa ranges from Massachusetts to Minnesota, south to South Carolina and west to Alabama and Oklahoma. It is the only cactus which is widespread in the East.

(continued overleaf)



Distribution of *Opuntia humifusa*



● Verified since 1978
○ Reported prior to 1978

Distribution in Massachusetts by Town

PRICKLY PEAR (continued)

POPULATION STATUS

Prickly Pear is a species of "Special Concern" in Massachusetts. Since 1978, fourteen occurrences have been reported and prior to that four occurrences had been recorded. This species rarity is attributable to the scarcity of suitable habitats, its occurrence at the northern edge of its range, and possibly limited dispersal of seeds.